

Testimony of Jodi M. Thomas
Before the Connecticut General Assembly
Public Safety & Security Committee
February 15, 2011

My name is Jodi Thomas and my husband, Ron Crabb, was killed in the Kleen Energy explosion on February 7, 2010. He was 42 years old. I submit this testimony in support of proposed House Bill 5802, which my family and I support fully. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about this wonderful man.

Ron was a man who lived and loved life every day. He loved his family with his whole heart. He inspired a loyalty in friends that I have seldom seen in my lifetime. He brought joy and laughter to so many people, even strangers. I have boxes full of cards and letters from people telling us how Ron touched their lives and what a good man he was. Everyone just loved him, from the time he was a little boy. He was a very special person - the kind you only meet once or twice in a lifetime, if you are lucky. When he saw that something needed change, he tried to help fix it. When he saw that someone needed a hand, he gave it. He gave of himself freely and with joy.

He also gave his time to the community, the union and the people of the State of Connecticut. He had just completed a six-year term on the Town of Colchester Board of Finance and served on the Colchester Democratic Town Committee. He was the immediate Past-President of the Connecticut Plumbers & Pipefitters Union, Local 777. Prior to that post, Ron served as Recording Secretary for the Local and as a member of its Executive Board. Ron also served for six years on the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection's Licensing Board for Heating, Piping, Cooling and Sheet Metal Work, having been appointed and re-appointed by two consecutive Governors. He was honored with the Connecticut Secretary of State's Public Service Award in 2003.

Ron was very proud of his trade and believed strongly in the principles of unionism. He was a talented, skilled tradesman who worked hard and conducted himself ethically and with integrity. He believed that everyone should have a voice and believed in focusing on unity and common ground. I have personally heard countless stories of Ron diffusing tension on various jobs or working parties through jurisdictional and other disagreements. Jobsite and worker safety were also very important to Ron and I recall several specific examples of Ron reporting violations and/or sending his men home until a safety issue, such as exposure to asbestos, was fixed.

Ron had been working 40 hours per week at the Kleen Energy plant since September 2009, when he was hired by IST to perform the instrumentation and control work at the plant. This is a specific area within the trade for which Ron had obtained specialty certification. He had done instrumentation and control work at many power plants over the years, when those jobs were available and in between regular pipefitting jobs. About 4 or 5 months after starting at Kleen Energy, in late January 2010, IST asked Ron to be the General Foreman for instrumentation and he was given authority to hire a crew. He then began

working seven 12-hour days and had been doing so for only about a week or two before the explosion.

Ron and I talked about his job at Kleen Energy at least a little bit every night. I know that he felt challenged by the work and wanted to do a good job, not just because of his work ethic, but also to help his trade possibly secure more work in this specialty. Ron had, in fact, been offered another job twice during the time he was at the Kleen Energy plant, but turned it down. Instead, he decided to stay and honor his commitment to see the instrumentation through.

I hope to be able to give a sense of how this devastating tragedy has affected our lives. Ron left behind two sons: my step-son, Tyler, age 19, and our our seven-year-old little boy, Dylan. Ron adored his sons. By everyone's account, he was an extraordinary father. Every one of my son's friends (and their parents) thought he was the greatest dad in the world - and he was. He took Dylan (and often his friends) everywhere - enjoying all that nature can offer and especially fishing, hiking and sports. And no matter how hard Ron had worked on a given day, he always had time to wrestle and play with Dylan. Every day when we heard Ron's footsteps come up the porch, Dylan would jump up and scream "Daddy's home!" The dog would jump up and run to the door and a smile would come across my face. Our home lit up with joy when Ron came home from work each day.

Dylan is too young to grasp the full magnitude of this devastating loss and how it will impact him in the future. But what he does know is that his daddy went to work one day and never came home. He also knows that daddy died in an explosion. Because of this, the security of his world was shattered. Although it is getting a little better, he worries about something bad happening to me when he was not with me. The most heartbreaking thing, though, is that this beautiful little boy will be deprived of father's love, guidance and companionship for the rest of his life.

As for me, this loss and my grief have, at times, been so big that I could hardly find the words to express them. I can best describe it as profound heartache. Ron, to me, was an angel here on earth. My angel. We always felt that we were meant to be together. I thanked God every night for nineteen years for bringing Ron to me. And I was so proud of him - who he was as a man, a husband, a father, a tradesman, a public servant - loyal, ethical, loving, intelligent, funny, strong. But most of all, I just loved him with all my heart. Nineteen years may seem like a long time, but it was not enough.

The manner and cause of Ron's death have only compounded our family's grief. This tragedy should never, ever have happened. It was preventable. This is why I urge you, please, do not allow Ron's death to be in vain. Real change and real protection for our workers must come out of this. It is the only way to truly honor him and the other men who lost their lives, whose families are forever broken. Together with the other tragedies that occurred from natural gas pipe purging, and the world of heartache and loss that have resulted, the lessons here could not be any more apparent or urgent. Failing to make good come from this would be the biggest tragedy of all.

My family and I support, wholeheartedly, the enactment of H.B. 5802, an Act Adopting Certain Safety Recommendations of the Thomas Commission. We are grateful to the many co-sponsors of this bill and all those who worked so hard to formulate it. The one aspect of the bill to which we would like to add comment involves the special inspector required under Section 2. We simply want to make certain that any such inspector be chosen under regulations or procedures adopted by the the involved agencies so that indepedence is ensured.

We would also like to note that we are very grateful for the work of the Thomas Commission, OSHA and the U.S. Chemical Safety & Hazard Investigation Board, whose findings helped lay the foundation for this change.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak and for your work on these critical and urgent issues.